

The Religious Project of “Padrinho Laudelino” in Southern Brazil in the First Half of the 20th Century: Between Saint Francis of Assisi and Afro-Indigenous Ancestry

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Abstract

This text is about a religious project carried out in the first half of the 20th century by an African descendant man, an official of the Brazilian Navy, in Porto Alegre, capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Laudelino founded a place of worship, with a diversified pantheon, which ranged from former African enslaved blacks and Brazilian Indians to Catholic bishops. It is the “Spiritist Shelter Francis of Assisi”. The experience is discussed here as being inherent to the multi-differentiated nature of Umbanda: a religion in which both a hierarchical centralization and a rigid doctrinal explicitness are absent. Therefore, being aware of the cultural and doctrinal diversity is crucial to understand Umbanda in its historicity. In this perspective, this text discusses “Padrinho Laudelino’s” experience and his effort to create an Umbanda and a self-image that are able to resemble his horizon of understanding of religion: Catholicism.

Keywords: Mediumistic religions; Afro-Brazilian religions; Memory.

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Introduction

The name Laudelino Manoel de Souza Gomes is connected with the history of Umbanda in the southernmost state of Brazil: Rio Grande do Sul. Umbanda is a mediumistic religion that worships both the enslaved black ancestors and the first inhabitants in Brazilian territory: the Indians. The former, worshiped as Pretos Velhos and the latter as Caboclos. In contrast, it recognizes and worships ancient African deities, the Orixás, who, in Umbanda, start to coexist with monotheism and Christian ethics reinterpreted by 19th century French Spiritism.

An African descendant, a Navy officer, a musician and a reader of Gilberto Freire and Florestan Fernandes, Laudelino brought a new cultural reality to Porto Alegre in the 1930s. He founded the first Umbanda temple in the state capital. The emergence of the Spiritist Shelter Francis of Assisi, as the center founded in 1933 was called, entailed a unique specificity when it comes to the mediumistic and Afro-Brazilian field in Rio Grande do Sul: an original ritual, called “semiromba”, with a very explicit interface, both with Spiritism and with the Tridentine self-understanding (Poulat, 1971) of Catholicism.

From the Spiritism codified by Allan Kardec, Laudelino obviously brought the communication with spirits, but also the exegesis and the Christianized reading of mediumistic phenomena. Likewise, as a legacy of the spiritist work of codification, emerged the salience of charitable action. In this regard, the work founded by Laudelino invested in an identity in which charitable action appeared as a more than evident principle, starting with its name: a Shelter, which should serve as a retreat for the helpless members of the so-called Congregation of the Spiritist Franciscans of Umbanda, of which Laudelino was the first Rector or Senior Brother.

From Catholicism, Laudelino brought, above all, the cult of St. Francis of Assisi, besides a ritual and doctrinal record extremely related mostly to Tridentine self-understanding, with an emphasis on the separation between nature and grace, sacred and profane. Associated to Tridentine Catholicism, we will also find a very clear sense of hierarchy, ritualized in clothes, gestures and supported by an original doctrinal effort. These general characteristics appear throughout the time the center remains open to the public.



Figure 1 - An outstanding characteristic in the construction of the founder's identity is his close relation with the Catholic bishops. In this portrait, Laudelino poses with a pectoral cross and a cape, like the Catholic bishops, composing this image with indigenous attributes in the direction of the worship of Umbanda Caboclos (Collection of the Spiritist Shelter Francis of Assisi).

Currently, Laudelino's presence is clearly felt. He was born in 1889, in Porto Alegre (one year after the abolition of slavery in Brazil) and died in this city in 1950. Therefore, today, the members of the congregation did not have a direct contact with Laudelino. However, facts about his life and the life of the Congregation emerge as events "lived indirectly", as shown by Michael Pollak (1992), referring to the memories not directly experienced by the group. Laudelino's biographical construction is inextricably tied to the construction of identity of the center he founded. I believe that it is a link of intelligibility to understand the personalism which surrounds the position of the Senior Brother or Sister in the Congregation and it is quite prominent in the religious practice of the predecessor of the current leader (Isaia, 2018).

Semiromba Umbanda: ritual and doctrinal specificities

According to collected statements, the teachings that underlie the ritual and doctrinal identity of the Congregation founded by Laudelino were mediumistically passed on to the founder. Therefore, precepts, chants and prayers appear as unquestionable realities, grounded in the contact between men and tutelary spirits of the center. They found sacred realities, which are not subject to human scrutiny. As it regulates the daily aspects of the congregation, the contact with the spirit world reinforces the asymmetry of power between the holder of the medical faculty and the other members of the congregation. Consequently, if the foundation and the rules of the center are referred to "another plan", the spirits of the center are regularly consulted to address administrative, doctrinal, and behavioral issues. An example is the regular verdict of a Preto Velho, who is consulted to elucidate the everyday issues in the center. Currently, Preto Velho is known as Pai Jovino and "comes down" in the person who today is considered the second authority of the center. It is the oldest member of the congregation and the mother of the current Senior Sister or Rector. Pai Jovino's verdict is crucial to address issues such as the admission of new members of the congregation to the "current", to clarify their doubts and solve problems related to health, family and love. The importance of Pai Jovino's intervention through his respective medium reaffirms in the memory of the members of the congregation as an important identity marker, able to confer legitimacy and attest to the seriousness of the center. As an example, we present Mrs. Deci Gonçalves Correia's statement:

I started in Umbanda coming directly from the city of Soledade to Porto Alegre, because I was sick and needed to go to the doctor. So, I came here to treat myself. I got here, I did all the exams and the doctor said I had less than 6 months to live. That's what he gave me. My uncle, who participated in the Brothers Congregation for the Light, brought me to the shelter. I arrived at the shelter, had an appointment with 'Pai Jovino' and he prescribed me Umbanda work: giving fruit to the Orixás. I did it. I brought fruit and he did the work, which was dispatched in the river. I went there and entered Guaíba River and I left the place feeling much better. When I got home, because we arrived at the Congregation back from that work, I started feeling good. I stayed at the Umbanda Yard for seven days and they worked with me, then I embodied

inside the Yard, at Work - on the day of Pretos Velhos (Correia, 2017).

As those tutelary spirits do not “come down” equally among the members of the congregation, the holder of this faculty ends up accumulating a considerable symbolic dividend among supporters and attendees of the center. In the past, this faculty was concentrated in the figure of the Senior Brother or Sister. At present, however, this role is reserved to the sister of the Senior Sister, Deci.



Figure 2: Contact with the tutelary spirits of the center has always been asymmetrical among the Franciscan Spiritist Members of Umbanda Congregation, symbolically reinforcing the power of the holder of this faculty. In this photo, probably in the late 1940s, the founder appears “receiving” a drover. (Collection of the Spiritist Shelter Francis of Assisi).



Figure 3. The number of members of the congregation who can have direct contact with the spirits has always been a minority in relation to the others, symbolically reinforcing the position of this minority, as we can see in this photo from the 1940s. A large number of members of the congregation participated in the rituals, but did not go into a trance (Collection of the Spiritist Shelter Francis of Assisi).

Semiromba Ritual: Catholicism as a religious horizon

In the semiromba ritual brought by Laudelino from Rio Grande do Sul to Umbanda, the role of the cult of ancestors occupies a prominent place, interacting with the personal experiences lived by the founder. After leaving Rio do Grande do Sul, Laudelino spent a major part of his life on board, as a Navy officer. According to the collected

statements, the founder had even visited Africa, having spent a period of his life in northeastern Brazil, more precisely in Maranhão. Bantu religiosity, which is explicitly present in several religious manifestations in Maranhão, seems to have had a clear influence on Laudelino and on the ritual and doctrinal characteristics of the Congregation he founded. The presence of ancestral spirits together with the cult of the Orixás, Inquice or Vodun was pointed out by the most traditional ethnographic studies. I quote here Arthur Ramos (1981), who already identified them, referring them to the Bantu influence. Likewise, Edson Carneiro (1991, p. 194) showed that even in Bahia some “Caboclo Candomblés” looked more like spiritist sessions with a colorful ritual. Likewise, in Pernambuco, Waldemar Valente (1955, p. 104) notices the prominent presence of indigenous ancestral spirits, worshiped as the owners of the land, in Candomblés that seemed “real spiritist centers”.



Figure 4. The similarities with Spiritism are seen in the adoption of the “Work Table” and in the practices such as psychography (Collection of the Spiritist Shelter Francis of Assisi)

The statements collected among older members of the congregation and with Laudelino’s family emphasize his permanence in the north and northeast of the country before moving to Porto Alegre in the 1930s. Some signs are indications of Laudelino’s familiarity with religious experiences incorporated to the pantheon and to the doctrine characteristic to the Shelter. First, the familiarity with invoking the spirits of the Indians, which was extremely popular in Caboclo Candomblés in the Northeast. Moreover, the presence of the spirits of drovers, Easterners. It is noteworthy the “import” of unusual cultural figures in Umbanda in Rio Grande do Sul, as is the case of Father Cícero Romão Batista, who occupies a prominent place in the pantheon venerated in the center. Laudelino’s permanence in São Luiz, Maranhão, seems to have been decisive in incorporating experiences in the face of cultural realities such as the Tambor de Mina and the Terecô, in which African elements coexist with a varied pantheon, where the Indian stands out (Ferretti, 1991, 1997, 2011). In contrast, the founder’s experience with Catholicism was crucial for the ritual and doctrinal definitions of the center. I argue that this is due to the fact that Laudelino kept Catholicism as a prescriptive religious model (Isaia, 2020). It is impossible to think of the ritual and doctrinal reality of the Shelter without mentioning Catholicism as a point of reference. This reality is explicit, both in the ritual and doctrinal definitions, and in the construction of the public image of the founder. In relation to this reality, we can see in the collection of the Shelter the presence of photos in which the founder clearly tried to resemble the representation adopted by the Catholic bishops of the time. Therefore, we can find Laudelino wearing capes, pectoral crosses, gloves at several ritual moments. There is an emblematic portrait, painted in the forties, in which Laudelino appears with the pectoral cross of Catholic bishops, which consists of the feathered headdress typical of Brazilian Indians’ clothing. The similarity with the episcopal figure is also found in a ceremonial manual of the center entitled precisely “Book to Pontify Umbanda Offices” (ABRIGO, 1946). The similarity with Tridentine Catholicism can also be seen in the use of Latin in some ritual occasions. Similarly, Laudelino tried to bring African cosmogony closer to Catholicism. This is evident when, in the context of the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary by Pope Pius XII, Laudelino defends an Iemanjá (female Orixá linked to motherhood) elevated to heaven. According to the mythical Yoruban narrative, Iemanjá had suffered the incestuous attacks of her son Orungan. Laudelino argued that these attacks did not happen thanks to the intervention of Oxalá (Orixá of creation), who elevated Iemanjá to heaven. Likewise, from Catholicism, Laudelino brings the organizational model of the Congregation he founded. In fact, the organization of the

Congregation is a big debtor of the Third Franciscan Order, founded by Saint Francis of Assisi in the 13th century, for lay people of both sexes, who without abandoning their families, followed a rule of prayers and works of charity, in communion with the Franciscan spirit. Also, Laudelino's successor stated in an interview: "I am from the Third Order", using the verb in the present symptomatically (Guedes, 1995). The opposition between spirit and matter, nature and grace, in keeping with the Catholic Tridentine emphasis, even reached a rigid control of conduct, placed especially among women. This praise to asceticism also reached the condemnation of carnival, in a country where this event is particularly experienced with the prominence of Afro-descendant population. Actually, at carnival, the spirit of a Brazilian bishop, contemporary to Laudelino in São Luiz, Maranhão, Dom Francisco de Paula e Souza, "came down" to earth to preach spiritual retreats.

Concluding remarks

The research carried out with the document collection regarding the Spiritist Shelter Francis of Assisi in Porto Alegre showed a religious experience extremely indicative of the founder's own experiences. We believe it is impossible to focus on this experience without mentioning these perceptions and the founder's effort to create an interpretation of Umbanda anchored in Catholicism as a comprehensive religious limit. However, we cannot obviously think of this Catholic presence from an essentially rationalist perspective. It's precisely the opposite: what shows the richness of Laudelino's work is its polysemic relation, able to articulate differences, composing itself plastically with reality, far beyond formal logic. Laudelino managed to bring together the organizational model of the Third Franciscan Order and the charitable action present in it, with the spiritist doctrine, where charity appears as a cornerstone. He also managed to articulate the external aspects of Catholicism, the broad majority in Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century, with the belief in reincarnation of a spiritist nature, as well as in the cult of ancestors, highly indebted to the Bantu Africans and that was so important in the formation of Umbanda as a religion. We believe that the doctrinal and ritual solutions that Laudelino reached, as well as his acceptance in the city of Porto Alegre in the first half of the 20th century, can be partly explained in the current values in a social environment still marked by the Catholic presence, but in which the memory of the African diaspora was so present.

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